DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 125 SO 014 557

AUTHOR Mukhopadhyay, Carol Chapnick
TITLE What Is an Egalitarian Family: Reflections from a Los Angeles Hospital.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (Arcata, CA, June, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Family (Sociological Unit); Females; *Home Management; *Income; Males; *Role Perception; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Science Research; *Spouses

ABSTRACT

The degree to which spouses actually share household tasks and income production is compared to their ideological commitment to sex role equity. Data were obtained from long-term intensive fieldwork with 19 Los Angeles nurses and their 18 families and from the researcher's doctoral dissertation. All data on family performance patterns indicate a highly segregated division of labor, with virtually all tasks the responsibility of a single spouse. Of the 98 tasks categorized, 50 were performed primarily by wives, 39 by husbands, and 9 were shared. Task allocation continues to be determined by traditional role designations, i.e., the wife prepares meals; the husband repairs the car. Deviation from traditional roles occurs only when a wife's job commitment constrains her from carrying out role-designated responsibilities. Thus, the actions of those families who identified themselves as egalitarian do not differ significantly from other families in the study; their self-characterizations only reflect general intentions. Further, wives are reluctant to accept equal responsibility for the provider role, even when their income exceeds that of their spouse. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Carol C. Mukhopadhyay
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED228125

WHAT IS AN EGALITARIAN FAMILY: REFLECTIONS FROM A LOS ANGELES HOSPITAL

Paper presented at National Women's Studies Association
Annual Meetings, 1982
Arcata, California

Carol Chapnick Mukhopadhyay
Department of Anthropology - 400
California State University
Chico, CA 95929

SP014557

*The data referred to in this paper comes from material in my dissertation (Mukhopadhyay, The Sexual Division of Labor in the Family, UC Riverside, 1980).

NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION---unless less than 3 lines

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic increase in research on alternative family forms, including an outpouring of new labels to characterize various innovative arrangements. One of the earliest and most comprehensive concepts to emerge has been the "egalitarian family," a form generally described as involving complete sex-role equality. Given its popularity, there has been surprising little attempt to delineate the features or range of relationships which might appropriately be characterized as "egalitarian." Nevertheless, examination of the contexts in which the term is used suggests at least five dimensions along which the egalitarian family can be contrasted with the "traditional" or "conventional" Euro-American family. They are: the authority structure (shared), the division of labor (shared), the structure of other family roles (shared); the task allocation process (free choice); and the commitment to equity.

Most current applications of the term "egalitarian family" seem to assume all five elements are intrinsically interrelated. Yet, on logical and even empirical grounds, this need not be the case. My intention here, however, is to simply clarify the dimensions which I shall consider in subsequent portions of this paper.

The research on which I am reporting involved long-term, intensive fieldwork with a group of 19 Los Angeles hospital nurses and their 18 families. I was concerned primarily with constructing a formal model of the process through which families allocate tasks among alternative performers. To that end, I collected extensive data on performance patterns and the criteria used to allocate tasks. This research is described in detail in

my dissertation.

Given the nature, then, of my research, I will restrict my remarks to the sexual division of labor, including the process through which both domestic and income-producing activities are allocated. Even this narrow focus raises thorny methodological issues. If an egalitarian division of labor is defined as "sharing" of both work and domestic roles, how is each spouse's contribution to be measured, which tasks are to be included, and how complete should the sharing be? Should task PERFORMANCE be measured or is shared RESPONSIBILITY the crucial element to be evaluated. Does an egalitarian division of labor NECESSARILY require abandoning traditional performance patterns of task performance CONSISTENT with cultural precedents necessarily imply ACCEPTANCE of cultural norms or could they represent personal choices made from among the full range of options?

These are complex issues which cannot be treated adequately here. I mention them to emphasize the difficulty of applying concepts such as "egalitarian" to the relationships which obtain in real families. Nevertheless, I shall try to assess the degree of "egalitarianism" in the families in my studies using several indicators. I will first consider non-income producing activities and then turn briefly to the sharing of paid work.

The Degree of Sharing of Household and Child Care Tasks

All data on family performance patterns* indicate a highly segregated division of labor with virtually all tasks the "job"

*The data referred to in this paper comes from material in my dissertation (Mukhopadhyay, The Sexual Division of Labor in the Family, UC Riverside, 1980).

of a single spouse. For the 13 comprehensive task clusters examined--meal preparation, marketing, laundry, housecleaning, meal cleanup, sewing, pet care, home improvements, yard work, car maintenance, house repairs, child care, and household finances, only the latter can be characterized as "joint" in that each spouse's participation was estimated to be at least one-third. This specialization is even clearer on more specific tasks. Only 9 of 133 sub-tasks studied could be classified as "shared" for at least two-thirds of all families.

Two indices I developed to measure task performance reveal the same pattern of role segregation. The mean Index of Shared Performance (ISP) measures the degree to which a task is characterized by joint rather than specialized performance. It ranges in value from 0 to 1.0, the latter representing total sharing of the task in the sample. For all 13 task clusters, the mean ISP is only .23, far from perfect sharing. For tasks traditionally designated "women's jobs," the ISP is an equally low .24. The Index of Female Participation calculates a value ranging from 0.0--no involvement by wives--to 1.0, total performance by wives. Only three task clusters--child care, care of pets and home improvements--show any sharing. The female clusters have IFP's greater than .85; the male task clusters have IFP's less than .20.

If an egalitarian family structure requires collective involvement of spouses in every major task area, then families in this study clearly do not approximate that ideal. But is this the most appropriate method to measure the extent of "sharing" of domestic and child care obligations? For example, if one looks

at the ENTIRE set of tasks on which data has been collected, it can be argued that a fairly balanced division of labor exists. Of the 98 tasks for which a predominant performer in the sample can be identified, 50 tasks are performed primarily by wives; but 39 are performed primarily by husbands. The remaining 9 are shared. Likewise, the mean Index of Female Performance (IFP) for all task clusters is .58--not bad when .50 constitutes an equal division of tasks.

Yet many researchers--and wives--would reject the "sharing" indicators I have used. They might reasonably argue that the more time and energy consuming task clusters--for example, meal preparation--should be weighted more heavily than the less frequently performed, optional, or relatively rewarding male clusters. But, their husbands might retort, the skill levels required for tasks such as house repairs should be considered in computing each spouse's contribution. Moreover, we have to consider the total division of labor--including income producing activities. And so the endless discussion over the value of work--and the size of each spouse's contribution--continues as it does among economists, anthropologists, feminists and spouses. And the question of what constitutes an "egalitarian" division of labor remains problematic.

The Degree of Consistency of Performance Patterns with Cultural Precedents

Let us, instead, turn to the process which generates these performance patterns. Despite the willingness of informants to cite non role-related rationale for their division of labor, most current performance patterns continue to be generated by cultural precedents, that is by associations of task areas with conjugal

roles. Thus, wives are assigned responsibility for meals because it is "the woman's job;" this also implies performing all ordinary and necessary tasks required to carry out that responsibility.

Comparison of family performance patterns with independently collected data on traditional role-designations for over 100 tasks and 13 task clusters lends support to these contentions. For the ten task clusters with clear role designations, 78% of performance patterns (136 of 174 cases) are consistent with traditional norms. Moreover, of the remaining 37 cases, 36 involve performance by BOTH spouses. In only one of the 174 cases does the OPPOSITE sexed spouse generally perform the task.

Data on more detailed tasks shows the same pattern. For 73 sub-tasks with identifiable cultural precedents, 77% of the 1139 cases conform to traditional sex roles. Only 4% (51) cases reverse sex-role expectations.

Not only do families adhere to cultural precedents; cases of apparent deviation do not necessarily reflect a reallocation of traditional responsibilities. The task allocation model described in my dissertation (Mukhopadhyay 1980), contains a helper selection process through which those normally responsible can, when faced with valid situational constraints, delegate the task to one or more substitutes. Given the dual-worker status of ALL couples in my study and hospital schedules which require weekend and evening work, the wife's job commitment often constrains her from easily carrying out her role-designated responsibilities. Situational constraints, then, seem to account for much of this apparent movement of husbands into traditional wifely tasks.

Comparision of family performance patterns on selected tasks under different combinations of husband and wife work schedule

supports this interpretation. While the wife's presence at work may not be SUFFICIENT to produce a deviant pattern--or a "helper"--it is generally the ONLY condition under which deviation from norms occurs. Likewise, her presence at home almost always produces enactment of the cultural precedent, REGARDLESS of whether the husband is at work or also at home.

Ideological Commitment and Actual Behavior

From the evidence presented thus far, families in this study neither share tasks nor reallocate responsibilities in areas where some sharing is evidenced. But what about those families who describe themselves as committed to sex-role equality and who have purportedly rejected traditional sex roles?

Comparision of performance data for families varying in EXPRESSED sex-role ideology indicates self-styled "egalitarian" families do not differ significantly from other families in either the husband's participation in female task areas or in their reliance on cultural precedents for primary responsibility. While there are some significant differences in the ISP (Index of Shared Participation) between traditional and egalitarian families, over half the task clusters remain specialized and consistent with sex roles and the ISP is only .43, where 1.0 respresents complete sharing. There are no significant differences between families on the Index of Female Participation (IFP). Moreover, the higher ISP may simply reflect greater constraints since egalitarian couples generally lack children old enough to "help out" when one spouse required assistance. Finally, ideology appears to produce exaggerated estimates of sharing among these couples.

Overall then, and given my intense contact with these informants, the actual behavior of self-styled egalitarian families does not differ significantly from other families in the study. Their self-characterizations, instead, appear to reflect general intentions, proposed patterns of AUTHORITY, and a philosophical distaste for a stereotypic--and perhaps mythical--"traditional" conjugal relationahip. While this may produce more liberal interpretations of constraint conditions and a willingness to accept more individual responsibility or to "volunteer" more frequently, it does not produce a reallocation of the traditional hierarchy of responsibilities nor role-sharing in the division of labor.

Sharing of Income-Production Responsibilities

Finally, one must consider the other side of the traditional equation--income-producing activities. Quantifiable data--i.e. dollar amounts--can provide objective estimates of spouses contributions to the household income. Yet these often do not reflect informant's own subjective estimates, estimates in part based on perceptions of primary responsibility. Thus while I "objectively" coded 14 of 18 families as having "both" spouses earning incomes, 17 of 18 couples coded husbands as having primary responsibility or being the primary contributor in the household--even if the wife earned more!

Wives are particularly reluctant to accept equal responsibility for the provider role and systematically underestimate their percentage financial contribution to the household when it equals or surpasses that of their spouse. They also describe their own work as "personal satisfaction" or as "helping out," with their

income being for "extras," "luxuries" and "personal" items. While some families separate spouses' earnings, in most cases such distinctions are largely symbolic.

Negotiations over the division of household labor also affect informant income estimates since "helping out" in one area presumably implies the obligation to reciprocate in other areas. All of this only serves to emphasize the extent to which calculations of spouses contributions to the family--be it in the area of income production, domestic work, or decision-making--are subjective transactions which cannot easily be assessed using conventional objective measures.

Conclusion

If these results have wider validity, we must then ask what criteria are being used by those who have heralded the arrival of the egalitarian family. If role-sharing is not an important element, then we must specify in precisely what ways the "modern" family deviates from the complementary--albeited role-segregated--family of the past.